

LONG, LONG AGO¹

By FREDERICK ORIN BARTLETT

From The Bellman

WHEN the brakeman swung back the door and with resonant indifference shouted in Esperanto "Granderantal stashun," Galbraithe felt like jumping up and shaking the man's hand. It was five years since he had heard that name pronounced as it should be pronounced because it was just five years since he had resigned from the staff of a certain New York daily and left to accept the editorship of a Kansas weekly. These last years had been big years, full of the joy of hard work, and though they had left him younger than when he went they had been five years away from New York. Now he was back again for a brief vacation, eager for a sight of the old crowd.

When he stepped from the train he was confused for a moment. It took him a second to get his bearings but as soon as he found himself fighting for his feet in the dear old stream of commuters he knew he was at home again. The heady jostle among familiar types made him feel that he had not been gone five days, although the way the horde swept past him proved that he had lost some of his old-time skill and cunning in a crowd. But he did not mind; he was here on a holiday, and they were here on business and had their rights. He recognized every mother's son of them. Neither the young ones nor the old ones were a day older. They wore the same clothes, carried the same bundles and passed the same remarks. The solid business man weighted with the burden of a Long Island estate was there; the young man in a

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broker's office who pushed his own lawn mower at New Rochelle was there; the man who got aboard at One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street was there. There was the man with a Van Dyke, the man with a mustache and the fat, smooth-shaven man and the wives, the sisters and the stenographers of all these. They were just as Galbraith had left them — God bless 'em.

Swept out upon Forty-second Street, he took a long, full breath. The same fine New York sky was overhead (the same which roofed Kansas) and the same New York sun shone down upon him (even as in its gracious bounty it shone upon Kansas). The thrill of it made him realize as never before that, though the intervening years had been good to him, New York was in his blood. His eyes seized upon the raw angular buildings as eagerly as an exiled hill-man greets friendly mountain peaks. There are no buildings on earth which look so friendly, once a man gets to know them, as those about the Grand Central. Galbraith noticed some new structures, but even these looked old. The total effect was exactly as he had left it. That was what he appreciated after his sojourn among the younger cities of the West. New York was permanent — as fixed as the pole star. It was unalterable.

Galbraith scorned to take cab, car or bus this morning. He wanted to walk — to feel beneath his feet the dear old humpy pavement. It did his soul good to find men repairing the streets in the same old places — to find as ever new buildings going up and old buildings coming down, and the sidewalks blocked in the same old way. He was clumsy at his hurdling, but he relished the exercise.

He saw again with the eyes of a cub reporter every tingling feature of the stirring street panorama, from gutter to roof top, and thrilled with the magic and vibrant bigness of it all. Antlike, men were swarming everywhere bent upon changing, and yet they changed nothing. That was what amazed and comforted him. He knew that if he allowed five years to elapse before returning to his home town in Kansas he would n't recognize the place, but here everything was as he had left it, even to the men on the corners, even to the passers-by, even to the articles

in the store windows. Flowers at the florist's, clothing at the haberdasher's, jewels at the jeweler's, were in their proper places, as though during the interval nothing had been sold. It made him feel as eternal as the Wandering Jew.

Several familiar landmarks were gone but he wondered if they had ever been. He did not miss them — hardly noticed any change. New buildings fitted into the old niches as perfectly as though from the first they had been ordained for those particular spots. They did not look at all the upstarts that all new buildings in Kansas did.

He hurried on to Park Row, and found himself surrounded by the very newsboys he had left. Not one of them had grown a day older. The lanky one and the lame one and the little one were there. Perhaps it was because they had always been as old as it is possible for a boy to be, that they were now no older. They were crying the same news to the same indifferent horde scurrying past them. Their noisy shouting made Galbraith feel more than ever like a cub reporter. It was only yesterday that his head was swirling with the first mad excitement of it.

Across the street the door stood open through which he had passed so many times. Above it he saw the weatherbeaten sign which had always been weatherbeaten. The little brick building greeted him as hospitably as an open fire at home. He knew every inch of it, from the outside sill to the city room, and every inch was associated in his mind with some big success or failure. If he came back as a vagrant spirit a thousand years from now he would expect to find it just as it was. A thousand years back this spot had been foreordained for it. Lord, the rooted stability of this old city.

He had forgotten that he no longer had quarters in town, and must secure a room. He was still carrying his dress-suit case, but he could n't resist the temptation of first looking in on the old crowd and shaking hands. He had n't kept in touch with them except that he still read religiously every line of the old sheet, but he had recognized the work of this man and that, and knew from what

he had already seen that nothing inside any more than outside could be changed. It was about nine o'clock, so he would find Hartson, the city editor, going over the rival morning papers, his keen eyes alert to discover what the night staff had missed. As he hurried up the narrow stairs his heart was as much in his mouth as it had been the first day he was taken on the staff. Several new office boys eyed him suspiciously, but he walked with such an air of familiarity that they allowed him to pass unquestioned. At the entrance to the sacred precinct of the city editor's room he paused with all his old-time hesitancy. Even after working five years for himself as a managing editor, he found he had lost nothing of his wholesome respect for Hartson. The latter's back was turned when Galbraith entered, and he waited at the rail until the man looked up. Then with a start Galbraith saw that this was not Hartson at all.

"I — I beg pardon," he stammered.

"Well?" demanded the stranger.

"I expected to find Mr. Hartson," explained Galbraith.

"Hartson?"

"I used to be on the staff and —"

"Guess you're in the wrong office," the stranger shut him off abruptly.

For a moment Galbraith believed this was possible, but every scarred bit of furniture was in its place and the dusty clutter of papers in the corner had not been disturbed. The new city editor glanced suspiciously toward Galbraith's dress suit case and reached forward as though to press a button. With flushed cheeks Galbraith retreated, and hurried down the corridor toward the reportorial rooms. He must find Billy Bertram and get the latter to square him with the new city editor. He made at once for Billy Bertram's desk, with hand extended. Just beyond was the desk he himself had occupied for so long. Bertram looked up and then Galbraith saw that it was not Bertram at all.

"What can I do for you, old man?" the stranger inquired. He was a fellow of about Bertram's age, and a good deal of Bertram's stamp.

"I'm looking for Billy Bertram," stammered Galbraith. "Guess he must have shifted his desk."

He glanced hopefully at the other desks in the room but he did not recognize a face.

"Bertram?" inquired the man who occupied Bertram's desk. He turned to the man next to him.

"Say, Green, any one here by the name of Bertram?"

Green lighted a fresh cigarette, and shook his head.

"Never heard of him," he replied indifferently.

"He used to sit here," explained Galbraith.

"I've held down this chair fifteen months, and before me a chump by the name of Weston had that honor. Can't go back any further than that."

Galbraith lowered his dress suit case, and wiped his forehead. Every one in the room took a suspicious glance at the bag.

"Ever hear of Sanderson?" Galbraith inquired of Green.

"Nope."

"Ever hear of Wadlin or Jerry Donahue or Cartwright?"

Green kicked a chair toward him.

"Sit down, old man," he suggested. "You'll feel better in a minute."

"Ever hear of Hartson? Ever hear of old Jim Hartson?"

"That's all right," Green encouraged him. "If you have a line in that bag you think will interest us, bring it out. It's against office rules, but —"

Galbraith tried to recall if, on his way downtown, he had inadvertently stopped anywhere for a cocktail. He had no recollection of so doing. Perhaps he was a victim of a mental lapse — one of those freak blank spaces of which the alienists were talking so much lately. He made one more attempt to place himself. In his day he had been one of the star reporters of the staff.

"Ever hear of — of Galbraith?" he inquired anxiously.

By this time several men had gathered around the two desks as interested spectators. Galbraith scanned their faces, but he did n't recognize one of them.

"Have n't got a card about your person, have you?" inquired Green.

"Why, yes," answered Galbraith, fumbling for his case. The group watched him with some curiosity, and Harding, the youngest man, scenting a story, pushed to the front. With so many eyes upon him Galbraith grew so confused that he could n't find his card case.

"I'm sure I had it with me," he apologized.

"Remember where you were last night?" inquired Green.

"Just got in this morning," answered Galbraith. "I — here it is."

He drew out a card and handed it to Green. The group gathered closer and read it.

"Harvey L. Galbraith, Trego County Courier."

Green solemnly extended his hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Galbraith. Up here on business, or pleasure?"

"I used to work here," explained Galbraith. "I came up on a vacation to see the boys."

"Used to work on this sheet?" exclaimed Green, as though doubting it.

"I left five years ago," answered Galbraith.

"Holy Smoke!" exclaimed Green, with a low whistle.

"You are sure some old-timer. Let's see — that's over fifteen hundred days ago. When did you come on?"

"Just before the Spanish War," answered Galbraith eagerly. "Hartson sent me to Cuba."

Harding came closer, his eyes burning with new interest.

"Gee," he exclaimed, "those must have been great days. I ran across an old codger at the Press Club once who was with Dewey at Manila."

He spoke as Galbraith might speak of the Crimean War. He pressed the latter for details, and Galbraith, listening to the sound of his own voice, allowed himself to be led on. When he was through he felt toothless, and as though his hair had turned gray.

"Those were the happy days," exclaimed Harding. "The game was worth playing then — eh, old man?"

"Yes," mumbled Galbraithe. "But don't any of you know what has become of Hartson?"

"Haydon would probably remember him —"

"Haydon?" broke in Galbraithe. "Is he here?"

He looked wistfully about the room to the corner where the exchange editor used to sit.

"He died last spring," said Green. "Guess he was the last leaf on the tree."

"He came on five years ahead of me," said Galbraithe. "He and I did the barrel murders together."

"What was that story?" inquired Harding.

Galbraithe looked at Harding to make sure this was not some fool joke. At the time nothing else had been talked of in New York for a month, and he and Haydon had made something of a name for themselves for the work they did on it. Harding was both serious and interested — there could be no doubt about that.

The details were as fresh in Galbraithe's mind as though it were yesterday. But what he was just beginning to perceive was that this was so because he had been away from New York. To those living on here and still playing the old game that story had become buried, even as tradition, in the multiplicity of subsequent stories. These younger men who had superseded him and his fellows, already had their own big stories. They came every day between the dawn and the dark, and then again between the dark and the dawn. Day after day they came unceasingly, at the end of a week dozens of them, at the end of a month hundreds, at the end of a year thousands. It was fifteen hundred days ago that he had been observing the manifold complications of these million people, and since that time a thousand volumes had been written about as many tragedies enacted in the same old setting. Time here was measured in hours, not years. The stage alone remained unchanged.

Galbraithe made his feet, so dazed that he faltered as with the palsy. Harding took his arm.

"Steady, old man," he cautioned. "You'd better come out and have a drink."

Galbraithe shook his head. He felt sudden resentment at the part they were forcing upon him.

"I'm going back home," he announced.

"Come on," Harding encouraged him. "We'll drink to the old days, eh?"

"Sure," chimed in Green. The others, too, rose and sought their hats.

"I won't," replied Galbraith, stubbornly, "I'm going back home, I tell you. And in ten years I'll be twenty-five years younger than any of you."

He spoke with some heat. Harding laughed but Green grew sober. He placed his hand on Galbraith's arm.

"Right," he said. "Get out, and God bless you, old man."

"If only Haydon had been here —" choked Galbraith.

"I expect he's younger than any of us," replied Green, soberly. "He's measuring time by eternities."

Galbraith picked up his bag.

"S' long," he said.

He moved toward the door, and the entire group stood stock still and without a word watched him go out. He moved along the narrow corridor and past the city editor's room. He went down the old stairs, his shoulders bent and his legs weak. Fifteen hundred days were upon his shoulders. He made his way to the street, and for a moment stood there with his ears buzzing. About him swarmed the same newsboys he had left five years before, looking no older by a single day. Squinting his eyes, he studied them closely. There was Red Mick, but as he looked more carefully he saw that it was not Red Mick at all. It was probably Red Mick's younger brother. The tall one, the lanky one and the little lame one were there, but their names were different. The drama was the same, the setting was the same, but fifteen hundred days had brought a new set of actors to the same old parts. It was like seeing Shakespeare with a new cast, but the play was older by centuries than any of Shakespeare's.

Galbraith hailed a taxi.

"Grandentral stashun," he ordered.

Peering out of the window, he watched the interminable procession on street and sidewalks. He gazed at the raw angular buildings — permanent and unalterable. Overhead a Kansas sun shone down upon him — the same which in its gracious bounty shone down upon New York.